

ONE BODY MANY MEMBERS

Part 1: One Body, Similar Members Bible Studies Bible Study #3: God's Intention for Diversity and Unity

Genesis 11:1-9 Acts 2:1-15

Divide the participating body into three groups. Encourage them to read the suggested passages, which may be photocopied in advance or written on a board for them to look up. The groups will discuss diversity and unity of the human/Christian community on the basis of the passages that are read.

- Group 1 can devote attention to the issue of diversity on the basis of the Tower of Babel story – Genesis 11:1-9 (Refer to Genesis 10:5 which records the plurality of languages.)
- Groups 2 and 3 can devote attention to the issue of unity on the basis of Pentecost story – Acts 2:1-15

Ask the groups to

- identify other biblical passages that refer to God's intention of diversity (Group 1)
- identify other biblical passages that refer to God's intention for unity (Groups 2 and 3)
- discern the implications of biblical teachings on diversity and unity for Christian faith and practices (all groups)

Gather as a large group and invite the sharing of findings, insights, criticisms and new possibilities. Inform them to be attentive and respectful of differing perspectives and proposals. After feedback, invite the members to formulate some concluding observations and statements.

- What are the societal visions and commitments for honoring diversity in North American society? In what ways can churches critically engage in such visions and commitments?

God's Intention for Unity and Diversity: A Reflection

Use the following as a reference. Bible study/group leaders may read it in advance and present a summary to the group if this is helpful. Otherwise, hand it out to participants for further study at home.

Great world religious founders lifted up universal values

The religious founders of the great world religions were visionaries. Even though they grew up in a particular cultural community and were shaped by a religious tradition, they exemplified values of universalities in their teachings and actions. They emphasized the importance of cherishing a common humanity with all its creative diversity, and voiced the interconnectedness of human life with the rest of the creatures in creation. They often directed their followers from rigid anthropocentric to an ecocentric approach to life. Judaism and Christianity as world religions share such an ethos.

Christianity and Christ grew up amid pluralism

Christianity evolved in a world of multiple religions, philosophies and contending political systems. As a faith tradition, Christianity emerged in the bosom of Judaism, which in the first century C.E. consisted of persons with different religious affiliations like Pharisees, Sadducees, Scribes, Zealots, Samaritans and proselytes. Christianity even existed for a while as a Jewish sect. Therefore, diversity and plurality was not alien to Christianity.

Jesus grew up in such a pluralistic society. The twelve disciples that were selected by Jesus had different personalities and gifts, which were valued by Jesus. In addition, Jesus had numerous disciples who were women or men with diverse gifts, drawn from different communities. When the account of the life and work of Jesus was compiled, the disciples did not produce a singular monograph. Instead they produced a number of gospels (four of which are included in the New Testament canon) honoring the diverse needs of the existing Christian communities. Even the subsequent attempts to consolidate the four gospels into one gospel narration were rejected by Christian leadership. Thus, plural and diverse existence was a core component of Christianity.

Unlike most other religions of the world, Christianity as a

- How can churches benefit from the increasing diversity in North American society? How can they utilize it for regaining its authentic nature as a “Pentecost fellowship”?
- What are the hurdles for accomplishing a healthy balance of unity in diversity in the Christian communities of North America?
- What are some further resources that the ELCA needs to cultivate for greater inclusivity in its membership?

new faith tradition came into being in a burst of ethnic and linguistic plurality on the day of Pentecost. In the context of communities torn and segregated by ethnic and linguistic differences, the occurrence on the day of Pentecost was a miracle. It was a sign and symbol of how Christian communities should be, locally and globally.

Multicultural Christianity vs. Monocultural Patterns

As Christianity spread out of Jerusalem, the monocultural pattern of most of the then existing world communities did not allow the multicultural, multilingual and multiracial experiences of Pentecost to multiply, except in select commercial and imperial cities and towns. Even in and around Jerusalem, early Christians had to struggle with issues of inclusivity soon after Pentecost--for example, if circumcision was necessary for gentile converts (Acts 15:1-30). The Jerusalem Council had to resolve the issue by not insisting circumcision for gentile converts. When seeds of division crept in, St. Paul had to advise against the division among Christians in the city of Corinth (I Corinthians 1:13-18) and in churches in Galatia. “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus” (Galatians 3:28).

In spite of the miracle of Pentecost, monocultural existence became a reality for a long time including in European societies and nations. The multicultural and plural thrust got lost among large sections of Christianity, giving rise to eventual ethnic, racial, class, color and gender segregations and discrimination. One unfortunate development within Christianity was the misconceived claim of superiority of western Christianity along with western civilization. This was a result of political and economic superiority vastly acquired through European colonial hegemonic means. Also, modern missionary outreach--beginning in the 16th century by the Roman Catholic Church, and from 18th century onwards by the European and North American Protestant churches--spread the false image about Christianity around the globe as a western religion.

A global view on pluralism

With new awareness and greater interactions between Christians in the western and non-western world, recapturing the primal/Pentecost vision of Christianity as an egalitarian fellowship is pursued with greater intensity around the globe.

Missionary outreach and the migration and mobility of people (Christians and others) began in a small scale with the European colonial enterprise. The movement was perpetuated in recent decades by commercial enterprises, and due to natural and human caused disasters like famine, earthquakes, wars and genocides.

World communities have become increasingly multicultural and more pluralistic than ever before. Such mixing of communities has created numerous conflicts in various parts of the world. In a number of countries, the issue of diversity and plurality has become key in election agendas. Meanwhile the involvements of international organizations (including churches), political bodies, and various programs of education, liberation and empowerments have contributed to the greater awareness and acceptance of plurality and diversity.

The United States as laboratory for diverse Christianity

The United States was built on immigration and the principle of being open to new immigrants from around the globe. Among the nations of the world, countries like the United States have a unique opportunity to recapture the spirit of Pentecost in its Christian and secular life.

In fact, the United States is seen as a laboratory for multicultural Christianity, as the nation is home to the largest Christian population (235 million at present) in the world, and is expected to remain so in the foreseeable future. With the unique situation of having Christians from among all the major denominations and church traditions, and almost all the countries and communities around the globe, the U.S. situation resembles what is recorded in Acts 2:5: "Now there were devout Jews from every nation under heaven living in Jerusalem."

Scottish missiologist Andrew Walls has articulated this expectation (the United States as a laboratory) from Christians and Churches as follows:

The great issues of twenty-first century Christianity . . . will be about how African and Indian and Chinese and Korean and Hispanic and North American and European Christians can together make real the life of the body of Christ. The principal Christian significance of the United States may now be in the fact that--thanks to the immigrant law of the 1960s--nearly all the main Christian disclosures have functioning congregations there. More than in any other nation in the world, the body of Christ could be realized--or fractured--in the United States. (2002:69)

Recapturing the Pentecost ethos anew should be possible without much difficulty. It is the same Holy Spirit that created the Pentecost miracle that is guiding the church today. The challenge is whether Christians are open to the prompting and guidance of the Holy Spirit as on the first day of Pentecost. The greatest need in the churches in the United States is the embodiment of the spirit of Pentecost, not just in the spiritual realm but also in day-to-day community life.

Tower of Babel liberation

The two passages selected for study record God's intervention in human affairs. Although the account of the Tower of Babel gives an impression that the whole of humanity was speaking the same language, it may be referring to only the community that moved to the plain in Shinar (Genesis 11:2). In fact the preceding chapter, which gives a "Table of Nations," indicates that the people of different clans spoke their own languages (Genesis 10:5). The focus of the Tower of Babel was that a select group of persons tried to impose a single language (perhaps a commercial language) on a multilingual community to achieve their goal of building a city.

Cities in predominantly pastoral and agricultural communities stood for power and privilege. Cities were centers of trade and commerce. Cities were homes for people who exploited the villagers and smaller communities. God intervened on behalf of the exploited and challenged the values of reducing people into tools of labor to fulfill the megalomaniac ideas of city elites. As a strategy, God confused the language of the workers and liberated them from the clutches of the elite. The different languages helped the liberated people to articulate their own priorities and values and to celebrate diversity.

Pentecost charter

In Acts 2:1-15, we have the record of how the Church (messianic community) began. The miracle of Pentecost is a charter for Christian fellowship. It is a mandate for honoring people's cultures and traditions and finding a rightful place for them within Christian fellowship in healthy interaction.

The foundational commitment to diversity found in the life and teachings of Jesus, and affirmed at the inauguration of the Church at Pentecost according to the Scriptures, will also be the status at the end of time. (Revelations 7:9).

Reference:

Andrew Walls The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History. (Orbis, 2002) HSWilson/
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